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Hannes Meyer – a pronounced collectivist: from Co-op to the USSR

Richard Anderson explores exactly what made Meyer's collectivism so pronounced and the conceptual shift upon his move to the Soviet Union away from universality and toward politicisation.

Hannes Meyer called himself a 'pronounced collectivist' in a letter to Walter Gropius from early 1927. Meyer was negotiating the terms of his employment as master for architecture at the Bauhaus, and he took it for granted that close cooperation between students and teachers would be fundamental to his new post. But the further we read Meyer's letter, the clearer it becomes that his idea of collectivity might have been more dream than reality. Meyer admitted that he had not yet met any Bauhaus students and thus had 'no concept of their mentality.' He said some, not all, of the work displayed during the opening, held the previous December, of Gropius's new Bauhaus building in Dessau had impressed him. A lot of it reminded him of Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophical community at Dornach, Switzerland. In Meyer's words, much of it seemed 'cultish and aesthetic.' A surprising remark to make to one's potential employer, the rejection of the cult of aesthetics in favour of the collective gives us a clue to Meyer's developing concept of collectivity at a critical moment in his career. He held fast to a secular, rationalist, and constructive view of collectivity—one that he felt corresponded to his contemporary moment better than the allegedly 'cultish' production of the early years of the Bauhaus.

But how had Meyer's collectivism become so pronounced? And what might this mean for his concept of collective work? Meyer's notion of collectivity was not stable; nor is it easily defined. Cooperation and collaboration were central to his ethos as an architect, planner, and teacher, and we find these concepts embedded within projects and writings that

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range from his work for the cooperative movement in the early 1920s through his engagement with Leninism following his emigration to the Soviet Union in 1930.

The Swiss Cooperative Union offered Meyer both an opportunity to design a communal settlement and a language to describe the intentions of his early work. At the **Freidorf Estate in Basel (1919-24)**, Meyer synthesized the ideas of the Garden City Movement with the principles of collective ownership and management of the estate. He felt that the 'unitary spirit of the inhabitants corresponded to the unitary appearance of the houses.' Meyer soon adopted the term 'Co-op' as shorthand for the anti-individualist stance he developed in a range of media. He first attempted this in Belgium in 1924 at the International Exhibition of Cooperatives and Social Welfare. Working with Mr. and Mrs. Jean-Bard, Meyer presented his so-called '**Co-op Theatre**,' which comprised a series of performances on such themes as clothing, business, and dreams. The collective dimension of this work is evident in its response to the international and multilingual context of the exhibition. 'The difficulty,' Meyer wrote, 'was, without words or language, but rather with the Esperanto of gestures, to capture the essence of the cooperative.' The Co-op Theatre sought to transcend the individual and national through recourse to a world language—a mute Esperanto of movement—and approximating the forms of the phonograph and the cinema.

Meyer's other Co-op products functioned like the theatre. His 'Co-op linoleum cuts' from 1925-6 translate the aim of universal communication into the realm of architecture. In Meyer's print known as '**Abstract Architecture II**' the universal quality of its typified elements is enhanced by axonometric projection, which eliminated individual points of view. Meyer featured some of his Co-op work in the radical Swiss magazine "ABC: Beiträge zum Bauen" in 1926. In an issue Meyer edited, he published a statement by the painter Willi Baumeister that points to the reasoning behind Meyer's Co-op production: 'The need for relativity and the coordination of great complexes have given rise to the comprehensive and the fundamental; the collective and the typical.' By this logic, the typical enables the collective—

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as a principle of design and as a social group—to overcome the individualism that, in Meyer's thinking, impeded full engagement with the complex systems of production, distribution, and consumption of his contemporary moment.

The clearest statement of Meyer's internationalist collectivity is undoubtedly his tour-de-force essay 'The New World,' which was published in 1926 by "Das Werk". He offered a taxonomy of the social and technical elements that had called forth a new reality and presented a global vision of modernity. In Meyer's words: 'The Fatherland decays. We learn Esperanto; become citizens of the world.' The planetary dimensions of this view of collectivity inspired Meyer's universalist proposition that all objects are the product of the formula 'function x economy.' This understanding of the global context of design had definite implications for Meyer's views on architecture and art. 'Building,' he wrote, 'is a technical processes, not an aesthetic process.' The collectivity of Meyer's 'New World' depended on a belief in the transformative power of organizational and technical processes. National culture and regional identity give way to the prospect of a collectivity that might encompass the entire globe.

It was with these concepts in mind that Meyer negotiated his contract as master for architecture with Gropius in early 1927. The antipathy Meyer displayed toward 'cultish and aesthetic' qualities of early Bauhaus production was symptomatic of his general worldview. The architectural consequences of this position were evident in the design he submitted with Hans Wittwer for the League of Nations Building competition held in the same year. Meyer's rejection of aesthetic values in favour of universality is evident in his claim that the building 'represents nothing' and his statement that it should be understood as a 'technical invention,' not something that is beautiful or ugly.

Meyer would reiterate these ideas in both texts and projects during his three-year tenure at the Bauhaus, first as master for architecture and then as director. His essays 'Building' and 'Bauhaus and Society', of 1928 and 1929, respectively, strengthened the concepts already present in 'The New World.' The ADGB School in Bernau (1928-30)

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manifested Meyer's desire to translate functional requirements directly into built form and allowed him to experiment with the design of spaces for collectives of students. The construction of a series of apartment buildings in Dessau-Törten allowed Meyer to engage his students in an experiment in collective design. Throughout these years, Meyer remained distant from party politics, in spite of the fact that Communist cells had begun to develop within the Bauhaus as early as 1927.

Meyer's view of collectivity was radicalized only after his removal from the directorship of the Bauhaus. In the controversy that erupted with his dismissal, he claimed he had consistently opposed the politicization of the Bauhaus and noted that he had even closed down the Communist student organization. He admitted that he may have adopted a Marxist position on cultural matters—a rather diffuse statement—but had kept away from explicitly Communist organisation.

All of this changed after he moved to the Soviet Union in 1930 with a 'brigade' of former Bauhaus students. He had been invited by the Soviet Government to work as a foreign specialist in Moscow, where he became professor at the College of Architecture and Construction. During the six years Meyer spent in the USSR, he worked for various state trusts for the design of educational buildings and urban planning. But the aspect of his experience with the most important consequences for his notion of collectivity was his membership in the All-Union Union of Proletarian Architects, or VOPRA. This group, unlike the constructivist or rationalist factions, made its allegiance to the Communist Party an explicit part of its program. After having kept party politics at a distance throughout the 1920s, Meyer joined the most politicized circle of architects he could find.

Meyer was an eager student of Soviet architecture. In a text entitled 'On Marxist Architecture,' which probably dates from 1930 or 1931, Meyer attempted to integrate his views on collectivity with this new context. He asserted that the 'technical invention' of typical elements remained the fundamental task for socialist architecture. He admitted that artworks—Lenin portraits and Stalin busts in particular—were part of the artistic mission of

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socialist architecture. But he maintained that the building itself should be defined by its function, not considered an artwork. Elsewhere in this text we find similar instances of Meyer trying to align his long-held theories with a naïve, though explicit, engagement with the ideological climate of Soviet architectural culture. Meyer was criticised for this naiveté in 1931 following an exhibition of Bauhaus production in Moscow. In the catalogue that accompanied the show, Arkadii Mordvinov, a leading member of VOPRA, wrote that Meyer's rejection of architecture's artistic features and his 'mechanistic' functionalism demonstrated a failure to understand that 'in proletarian architecture technology and art should appear in a dialectical unity.'

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Meyer responded by sharpening his argumentation and framing his discourse in the terms of class struggle. The result was an abandonment of the universality of his notion of collectivity as he moved ever closer to the Party line. In a set of detailed responses, published in 1932, to a questionnaire from the Prague-based architectural group Leva Fronta, Meyer wrote that 'the progressive architect joins the front of the revolutionary proletariat as an active fighter.' But in the Soviet Union it was the Communist Party that defined the particular way that architecture was to join this front. In 1932, the Party liquidated all independent architectural organisations, including VOPRA, and reorganised the profession into a single union. That same year, Party officials mandated the 'critical assimilation of historical precedents' in the design of the Palace of the Soviets, the building projected to symbolise the Soviet state and establish new architectural norms. As a member of a new kind of collective—one that took the authority of the Communist Party seriously—Meyer followed suit and reoriented his thinking on architecture, art, and what it meant to be a Soviet architect.

The shift in Meyer's worldview was dramatic. While certain aspects of his mode of work remained intact, others appear to stand in direct opposition to his earlier positions. Describing his approach to architecture for the Soviet journal "Arkhitektura SSSR" in 1933, Meyer wrote that 'I never design alone,' indicating that he maintained his interest in collective

work. But elsewhere in the same article he reiterated the imperative for Soviet architects to study and assimilate the lessons of the classics for contemporary architecture. He made this more explicit in his work for the *journal Arkhitektura za rubezhom* (Architecture Abroad), which was published by the recently founded Academy of Architecture. In an issue of 1935, Meyer published a surprisingly positive review of Ivar Tengbom's Neoclassical Stockholm Concert Hall (1923-26). His praise for the colossal columns on the building's main façade indicates the seriousness with which Meyer and his other colleagues took the Party's imperative to assimilate classical heritage.

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Meyer's praise for Tengbom's building becomes even more striking when we consider that it was completed in the year before Meyer submitted his design for the League of Nations Building. The latter 'represented nothing,' and could thus, in Meyer's view, achieve a technical universality that suited a global vision of collectivity. We can only imagine what Meyer might have said about Tengbom's building in 1926. (The words 'cultish and aesthetic' spring to mind.) By the mid-1930s, Meyer's position had changed radically, a fact he attributed to the lessons of the Communist Party. In a surprisingly candid text of 1935, Meyer recounted the dialectical path he had traced during his time in the Soviet Union. He described his entry into this new collective as an 'escape into life.' 'I arrived in the USSR as a "fully-formed architect" and had to learn everything anew,' he wrote. 'Together with my Soviet colleagues, I grow daily. Because the Leninist architect is never finished.'

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Despite Meyer's commitment to the Soviet cause, he would only remain in the USSR until 1936. As the mass hysteria of the Communist Party's show trials and political terror developed, Meyer, like many of his foreign colleagues, came to be regarded with suspicion. He justified his leaving to his Soviet colleague Nikolai Kolli after returning to Geneva, claiming that his wages could not support his family, who had remained in Europe. Most importantly, he felt he had been artificially prevented from practicing architecture. After a short stay in Switzerland, Meyer departed for Mexico, where he would remain until 1949, in search of new opportunities to develop his identity as a 'pronounced collectivist.'

Richard Anderson is Lecturer in Architectural History at the University of Edinburgh. His research focuses on twentieth-century architecture in Europe and Eurasia, with particular emphasis on Germany and the former Soviet Union. His most recent book is *Russia: Modern Architectures in History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2015).